

NEWS from



Bill Postmus Supervisor, 1st District

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POSTMUS, BOARD SEEK RELIEF FROM NATURAL GAS RATE HIKES

SAN BERNARDINO—First District Supervisor Bill Postmus and the rest of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors today requested relief from rising natural gas rates from the California Public Utilities Commission. The request is in the form of a letter from the Board of Supervisors.

Of particular concern to the Board is the impact of rate increases on customers served by the Southwest Gas Corporation, which serves the High Desert and Mountain communities of San Bernardino County.

“I have received hundreds of communications from constituents asking that the county do something about natural gas price increases,” Postmus said. “While our bills are doubling and tripling, other Southwest Gas customers—such as those in Nevada—are paying two-thirds less.” Postmus said he has learned that Nevada customers are paying approximately \$.71 per therm while High Desert and Mountain customers in California are paying \$2.02 per therm.

“We’re hearing of \$300 and \$400 natural gas bills,” Postmus added. “If gasoline prices increased at the rate natural gas prices are increasing, we’d be paying \$4.50 a gallon.”

Postmus said his office recently offered two open-enrollment opportunities—one in Victorville and one in Needles—where more than 300 mostly low-income people were able to apply for assistance from county-administered utility payment and weatherization programs.

The Southwest Gas headquarters in Victorville has been picketed twice in recent weeks by hundreds of customers. Organizers have also reportedly collected more than 10,000 signatures to be submitted to the Public Utilities Commission.

“I’m not exaggerating when I say this crisis may prove to be deadly for some of the most medically

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vulnerable among us,” Postmus said. “Elderly and ill gas customers on fixed incomes are at risk.”

The Board of Supervisors today also approved the use of additional federal assistance funds administered by the state. The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program block grant funds are in the amounts of \$490,682 in Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) Emergency Contingency Funds and \$1,201,899 for the Weatherization, HEAP and Energy Crisis Intervention Program for the remainder of the year.

County staff estimated that the funds will help weatherize a total of 490 eligible low-income dwellings and provide gas and electric utility payment assistance to 8,833 low-income households.

The Board further asked staff to research and support legislation to increase assistance programs to include populations of moderate rather than only low incomes.

The Board also approved a request to the Education Electric Trust Committee of the PUC for a \$40,000 grant to assist the county in informing local businesses about ways to reduce their energy consumption.

The proposed project involves four tasks: 1) Hold 10 dedicated energy education and training events primarily targeting small businesses. 2) Setting up a dedicated on-call energy and small business center including a small business oriented information library and database at the Office of Small Business Development (OSBD) office in San Bernardino. 3) Preparation of energy deregulation printed materials and media presentations for dissemination to small business for further dissemination to their consumer base. 4) Providing technical assistance and small business loan packaging services for particularly hard-hit small businesses and those desiring to implement energy conservation and technologies in their businesses. The grant application will be for \$40,000. If approved, the grant will be used to fund one staff member and associated services and supplies for five months to perform the identified tasks.